

“Aware-Settler” Biblical Studies: Breaking Claims of Textual Ownership

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ABSTRACT

“Aware-Settler” is a term coined here to describe the various hermeneutics that arise as increasingly, non-Indigenous biblical scholars take seriously that their research is done on colonized Land. Paying special attention to the principle of possessiveness, the article suggests breaking stubborn Settler-scholar hidden-default assumptions of ownership, proposing instead that biblical texts might be understood as another form of “Treaty territory.” Indigenous scholars’ common emphases on Landedness, relationality, spirituality, and community good, can inform methodologies employed by Settler biblical scholars. These hermeneutical principles, learned in a contact zone characterized by attention to reciprocity and respect, are employed in a brief look at Matthew 28:25–28. The so-called Great Commission is a foundational text of colonialism; many Indigenous scholars have judged it as “unreadable.” For that reason it provides a particularly appropriate test-case for applying Aware-Settler hermeneutics focussed on breaking claims of identity and ownership.

KEYWORDS

aware-settler, Indigenous, settler, hermeneutics, biblical scholarship

For her Presidential address at the 2018 meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, Christine Mitchell spoke on “Reading Biblical Conquest Stories on Treaty 4 Land: Working Towards Reconciliation.”¹ She noted that already thirty years before, Robert Warrior, an Indigenous Christian, had warned of the unsuitability of many biblical stories, especially the Exodus, as a “way for Native Americans to think about liberation.”² Such stories are linked to conquest, colonization, and expulsion narratives all too familiar to North America’s Indigenous peoples because of Settler colonialism.³ Building on recommendations from Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission,⁴ Mitchell outlined three ways academics who work with such problematic texts might react: ignore them, let religious communities deal with their historic and current uses and abuses, or attempt to decolonize the texts in the public sphere.⁵ In advocating for decolonization, Mitchell challenged the overwhelmingly Settler biblical studies academy both to contextualize the so-called plain readings of these texts and to seek, wherever possible, reparative interpretations.⁶

1 Christine Mitchell, “Reading Biblical Conquest Stories on Treaty 4 Land: Working Towards Reconciliation,” <https://www.csbs-sceb.ca/index.php/annual-meetings/president-s-address/video/reading-biblical-conquest-stories-on-treaty-4-land-christine-mitchell>.

2 Robert Allen Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59, 1, 2 (2005; first published 1989): 2.

3 See the discussion in George E. Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 89-90.

4 National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation. “Calls to Action.” http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

5 Mitchell, “Reading on Treaty 4 Land.”

6 This article takes Mitchell’s point seriously by exploring reparative *methodologies* arising from the work of decolonising studies and Indigenous researchers, and proposing an “Aware-Settler” perspective (knowing that



Identifying as a Settler Scholar

Nêhiyâw researcher Margaret Kovach reminds us that “our knowledges are bound to place.”⁷ Together with other decolonising approaches,⁸ Indigenous methodologies seek a starting point in self-identification, the critical self-localization that helps situate the researcher in relationship to the subject.⁹ My place was, and is, Treaty Four territory on the Prairies, the northern edge of the Great Plains of North America. In 1911, my Norwegian grandfather and grandmother were given papers entitling them to what immigration posters promised as “free land” in south-west Saskatchewan. The homestead was the south-east quarter of section twenty-one, township fifteen, range seventeen, west of the third meridian, in GPS coordinates, 50° 16’12”N 108° 17’45”W. The much higher wheat prices of the 1910s, combined with recent railway construction connecting the Prairies to eastern markets, meant that farming must have seemed attractive. My grandparents were part of a flood of immigrants arriving in response. The homestead was on Treaty Four territory from which Assiniboine, Cree, and Lakota had been brutally removed by a Canadian government policy of starvation only forty years before my grandparents’ arrival, the Assiniboine and Nêhiyâw (Cree) scattered to reserved lands they had not chosen and did not want, hundreds of kilometres north and east.¹⁰

Did my ancestors know they were on Treaty Land? They are long dead and gone. I know it, and as Kathleen Minogizhigokwe Absolon notes, “the methodology is just as much about the person doing the searching as it is about the search.”¹¹ I am a grandchild of Northern European and American farmers given Land for which Treaties had been sought and signed by a Canadian government, which then systematically broke and ignored those Treaties.¹² I grew up surrounded by places and words—*Assiniboia*, *Piapot*, *coulee*—the Assiniboine, Nêhiyâw and Michif sounds which created in me a sense of not-quite-belonging that is helpful to an academic.¹³ The few stories I was told of

such awareness is always partial and in need of mentorship.) I wish to offer my appreciation here to JIBS and to the anonymous reviewers of this article. In their careful readings and detailed, constructive critiques, they *immeasurably* improved my initial draft, pointing me toward doing this research “in the good way” (see Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 146.) I offer my reviewers my great thanks.

7 Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 37, 52.

8 For an early and indicative example, see Fernando F. Segovia, “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30, 4 (2008): 489–502, here 492.

9 Kathleen E. Minogizhigokwe Absolon, *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2011), 69.

10 James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013), 184.

11 Absolon, *Kaandossiwin*, 74.

12 For a brief but damning survey, see Bob Joseph, *21 Things You May Not Know About The Indian Act: Helping Canadians Make Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples a Reality* (Port Coquitlam: Indigenous Relations, 2018).

13 Although on the “hypervisibility of white possession” see Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xiii. For a striking exposition on the advantage of unease to a writer’s concept of “home,” see Esi Edugyan’s *Dreaming of Elsewhere: Obser-*

the Indigenous peoples markedly missing from the Land where I grew up were romantic tales of cultures that had disappeared.¹⁴ They were “victimization-extinction” myths that failed to question the present.¹⁵ Only as an adult did I witness the contemporary vitality and resistance of the people whose ancestors had inhabited my particularly-emptied corner of the Prairies.¹⁶ Their descendants’ determined and very public struggles for justice, and the personal and patient mentorship of several Indigenous individuals, began the process of awakening me to the Treaties, to the realities of Settler-colonialism, and to my own Settler status.¹⁷

Because of a Lutheran cultural heritage tainted by the Second World War, and also because my academic career has been as a sessional professor without tenure, my research has been coloured by a suspicion of dominant narratives, despite my belonging to the colonizing culture and a position, otherwise, of white, male, privilege. Self-reflexive, self-locative methodologies are echoed in the co-operative prairie politics of my ancestors. I find in the work of Indigenous scholars a reminder that research should privilege principles of reciprocity and interdependence and bring benefits back to the community.¹⁸

In 2012 Fiona C. Black challenged Canadian academics: “can one promote biblical study in this country without addressing the impact that the Bible and its related religious traditions have had [on Indigenous Peoples]?”¹⁹ Colonization is not a past event, but rather an always-available, always-adapting, political, social, and ideological framework.²⁰ In the relatively recent history of many Settler societies, biblical texts were invoked in the public sphere to create, justify, or critique governmental policies affecting Settler-Indigenous relations.²¹ Some Settler Christian churches,

vations on Home (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2014).

14 Thomas King, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2012), 35. For how romanticizing past “Indians” was combined in Canada with deadly bureaucratic oppression of contemporary Indigenous peoples, see Mark Abley, *Conversations with a Dead Man: The Legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott* (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2013).

15 Laura E. Donaldson, “The Breasts of Columbus: A Political Anatomy of Postcolonialism and Feminist Religious Discourse,” 41-61 in Pui-Lan Kwok and Laura E. Donaldson, *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2002), 49.

16 On Indigenous resistance and resurgence, see Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples* (Edmonton: Brush Education, 2018), 20-21, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle’s Back* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter, 2011), 101-103.

17 Living in Quebec at the time, I was particularly informed by the 1990 Oka Crisis and the Idle No More movement, and by the vitality of the community at Kahnawà:ke. My status as a “Settler” was also made unforgettably and uncomfortably clear to me in Jerusalem in 2009 by an Israeli activist working for justice in relations with Palestine.

18 Absolon, *Kaandossiwin*, 31, Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 48, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1st ed. 2009. London: Zed Books, 2012), 41, 130.

19 Fiona C. Black, “Reading the Bible in ‘Our Home and Native Land’: Exploring Some Margins and Migrations in Canadian Biblical Studies,” 239-262 in Roland Boer and Fernando F. Segovia, eds. *The Future of the Biblical Past: Envisioning Biblical Studies on a Global Key* (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 255.

20 Elizabeth Fast and Marie-Ève Drouin-Gagné, “We Need to Get Better At This! Pedagogies for Truth-Telling About Colonial Violence,” *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* 10, 1 (2019): 95–118, here 96-97.

21 In addition to numerous minor biblical references in 19th century newspapers, the very name (and the underlying ideology) of the “Dominion” of Canada comes from Psalm 72:8 “He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.” See David Seljak, “Secularization and the Separation of Church and State

based on their understandings of the Bible, continue to focus on missions "to" Indigenous peoples,²² while other churches work in partnerships that recognize Indigenous agency and the dynamic hybridity that characterizes Indigenous Christianities.²³ Biblical scholars, whatever their relationship to religious traditions, must recognize that there is no simple binary to the Bible and Indigenous societies: many Indigenous people are Christian. Biblical texts, variously understood and interpreted, and whether judged positively or negatively, stand behind complex interactions, appropriations, hybridities, and histories.²⁴

In Australia, South Africa, Canada, and elsewhere, increasing numbers of Settler-descended biblical scholars are trying to engage with methodologies explicitly aware of, and acknowledging, problematic uses of scriptures, and the fact of living and conducting research on Land shared by Treaty.²⁵ "It is those who know these texts who must speak about the truth they contain," wrote Robert Warrior in 1989 (reprinted 2005), specifically those truths about the "terror and violence [biblical texts] can and have engendered."²⁶ From a Settler perspective this recognition includes a questioning of the ideological foundations of Settler claims to privilege on, and possession of, the Land, including claims on plants, water, minerals, animals, the Land's stories and history, and on the original inhabitants in that Land and its web of relations.²⁷

What I am calling "Aware-Settler" methodologies in biblical studies are not strictly speaking post-colonial. Rather, they understand themselves to be still very much embedded in the colonial enterprise and formed in an ongoing tension with it. With Margaret Kovach, I use the term "decolonising" methodologies.²⁸ Aware-Settler methodologies are open-ended and developing, as is Settler awareness. They will of necessity differ according to the particular colonial context. Punt notes there is no *single* "decolonising" methodology, but rather each is characterised by "a different focus

in Canada," *Canadian Diversity / Canadian Diversité* 6, 1 (Winter 2008): 6–24, here 8–9.

22 Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton, *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 3.

23 Examples of this are the books published by the Indigenous Settler Relations Program of the Mennonite Church Canada, namely: Steve Heinrichs, *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together* (Kitchener: Herald, 2013) and Steve Heinrichs, ed., *Unsettling the Word: Biblical Experiments in Decolonization* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2018).

24 Peter Lewis, "'Terra Nullius Amnesiacs': A Theological Analysis of the Persistence of Colonization in the Australian Context and the Blocks to Real Reconciliation," 181–200 in Mark G. Brett and Jione Havea, eds. *Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Theologies: Storyweaving in the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 181.

25 In the Canadian context, Fiona C. Black's contribution has been particularly important. See the directions she proposes for how biblical studies can engage in the task of reconciliation in Fiona C. Black, "Erasures and *Dysplacements*: The 'Belly-Myther' of Endor and Biblical Studies from Canada in Light of the TRC," 182–215 in Tat-Siong Benny Liew, ed. *Present and Future of Biblical Studies: Celebrating 25 Years of Brill's Biblical Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 207–208.

26 Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 7.

27 On the links between white racism and possessiveness, and disavowals of Indigenous sovereignty, see Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, xv. On relationality as a widely-employed Indigenous hermeneutic, see: Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 55–57, and Randy Woodley (Keetoowah), "Early Dialogue in the Community of Creation," 92–103, in Steve Heinrichs, ed. *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together* (Kitchener: Herald, 2013), 93.

28 Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 75. See also Edugyan, *Dreaming of Elsewhere*, 7.

and purpose.”²⁹ What such approaches share is some form of Settler recognition of what Indigenous scholars have been saying:³⁰ that the racist and violent use of the Bible historically and in the present, is allied with a hermeneutic oriented towards possessing Indigeneity.³¹ What this article aims to highlight is that the same colonialist systems that claim possession of Indigeneity also claim (or better, *assume* as default) a possession, whether as repository of faith or as subject of study, of the various texts of the Bible and related non-canonical literatures.

The findings of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) shone light on the particular complicity of churches in the historic oppression of Indigenous peoples.³² In ready partnership with a parsimonious Canadian government, churches operated severely-underfunded Indian Residential Schools that were the scenes of negligence, torture, and death.³³ Surveys from the early twentieth century indicated that nearly a quarter of the Indigenous children who were forced into Indian Residential Schools at that time died.³⁴ Duncan Campbell Scott, Indian Commissioner in 1914, remarked that half of the students in Indian Residential Schools at that time were not expected to survive.³⁵ Despite limited improvements, approximately 6,000 of the 150,000 Indigenous children forced into Residential Schools between the 1870s and 1996 either died or disappeared.³⁶ Part of the critique of the academic and practical misuses of scripture by Settlers must address this aspect of the Settler past: how texts were interpreted by the ecclesiastical bodies that ran the Schools either to justify, or to overlook, such horrors. The Residential Schools were only one example of policies that tried to extinguish, not only Indigenous possession of land, but Indigenous languages, cultures, spiritualities, and independent existence altogether.³⁷

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action 62 is titled “Education for Reconciliation.” In section two of that Call to Action, the Commission challenges post-secondary institutions to “integrate Indigenous knowledge.”³⁸ Throughout the TRC’s Calls to Action, there is a two-pronged approach. The first challenge is for academic institutions to find a place and guarantee funding specifically for Indigenous academics. The second is a call to educate those of us who are not Indig-

29 Jeremy Punt, “Intersections in queer theory and postcolonial theory, and hermeneutical spin-offs,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 4, 2 (2008): 1–16, here 1.

30 Among others, Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*.

31 For a description of possession as enforced through cultural homogeneity, see Adrian Jacobs, “The Meeting of the Two Ways,” 184-190 in James Treat, ed. *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 186. See also Laura E. Donaldson, “Native Women’s Double Cross: Christology from the Contact Zone,” *Feminist Theology* 10, 29 (January 2002): 96–117, here 97.

32 See https://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf, page 7.

33 Charlie Angus, *Children of the Broken Treaty: Canada’s Lost Promise and One Girl’s Dream* (Regina: University of Regina Press), 16-17, 20-22, 40.

34 Angus, *Children of the Broken Treaty*, 16.

35 Joseph, *Indian Act*, 54.

36 Joseph, *Indian Act*, 53. On the role of diseases caused by overcrowding and poor nutrition see Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains*, 176.

37 Joseph, *Indian Act*, 84.

38 See: https://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

enous to respect Indigenous knowledges and to learn from them,³⁹ without at the same time essentializing or attempting to colonize the "Indigenous other."⁴⁰ This article shares those objectives, as well as the Commission's understanding that making space in the Settler community for Indigenous methodologies and knowledge systems, while bringing Indigenous knowledges to universities and acknowledging their validity, are preconditions for a more just relationship.⁴¹ When it comes to recognizing and learning from various Indigenous uses of the Bible, and sharing the "Land" of biblical texts, such a change is crucial.

Here the dialogue between Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Chris Andersen is instructive. Firstly, Settler hermeneutics must always be situated and studied in tandem with Indigenous perspectives.⁴² Secondly, Indigenous knowledges should be understood through the lens of their "density" rather than their "difference," as the latter once again privileges a "white" perspective.⁴³ Andersen points out that Indigenous communities are knowers "not just of Indigeneity, but of whiteness as well."⁴⁴ Indigenous knowledges autonomously guide epistemology and methodology. They are not objects of study (and thus, again, of attempted possession) but instead help contextualize and deconstruct colonialism.⁴⁵ I suggest that exegesis of biblical texts might follow the paradigm of proper Treaty relationship: Aware-Settler biblical scholars must and will acknowledge the independence and sovereignty of Indigenous scholars and their methodologies even while learning from their insights and sharing textual "Land" with them.⁴⁶

To begin to explore what this might look like for non-Indigenous biblical studies scholars, I will touch on how claims of academic objectivity discredited by postcolonial, feminist/gender, and other approaches resurface in the "hidden-default" ownership of texts in Settler-colonialist hermeneutics.⁴⁷ This identification is a step in consciously avoiding "recentering whiteness"⁴⁸ as a hermeneutical principle. Secondly, I will examine how, despite their differences, Indigenous scholars'

39 Fast and Drouin-Gagné, "Pedagogies for Truth-Telling," 104.

40 Denise Nadeau, "Decolonizing Religious Encounter? Teaching 'Indigenous Traditions, Women, and Colonialism,'" 164-182 in Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton eds. *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 164.

41 On non-Indigenous scholars learning in dialogue from Indigenous scholars without recolonizing see Owen, *The Appropriation of Native American Spirituality*, 157-161, and on the problems with "gnaritas nullius" ("no one's knowledge") see Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style*, 132-133.

42 Chris Andersen, "Critical Indigenous Studies: From Difference to Density," *Cultural Studies Review* 15, 2 (2009): 80-100, here 81.

43 Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, xv.

44 Andersen, "From Difference to Density," 91.

45 Owen, *The Appropriation of Native American Spirituality*, 157-161.

46 In hermeneutics that arise from geography and relation this is necessarily so. But on the dangers to Indigenous peoples in sharing their ceremonial life with Settlers see Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance*, 69.

47 Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 135: "racialization works by extending the concept of 'race' to denote more than just the bodies of the non-white 'other'". See also Segovia, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism," 492.

48 Fast and Drouin-Gagné, "Pedagogies for Truth-Telling," 101.

common emphases on Landedness,⁴⁹ relationality,⁵⁰ spirituality,⁵¹ and community good,⁵² might inform methodologies employed by Settler biblical scholars. Finally, in a brief look at Matthew 28:25–28—the so-called Great Commission (and a text that undergirded the churches' involvement in the Residential Schools)⁵³—I will test some of the methods gained from this attempt at an “Aware-Settler hermeneutics.”

Settler Possessiveness and Biblical Texts

In recent years a growing consensus has arisen concerning the complicity of Christian scriptures in supporting structures of oppression and colonization. Diewert says it succinctly: “Scriptural texts have been incorporated into a theological architecture of timeless truths, wedded to European cultural practices, social structures, and political hierarchies, and imposed on Indigenous peoples with coercive force.”⁵⁴ “Wedded” is too generous a term: *welded* might be better. Settler-colonial claims to the full and authentic ownership of biblical texts were the result of a long historical process of European interpretations becoming what Moreton-Robinson calls, in a more general application of “whiteness,” the “invisible norm.”⁵⁵

These understandings of biblical texts now tend to extend to both Indigenous and Settler communities. On several occasions I have heard Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) traditional practitioners speak of the Bible to a group of my Settler students as “your book.”⁵⁶ As a biblical scholar working within the “Paul within Judaism” school with its emphasis on seeing the texts solidly within their first-century *Jewish* worlds, this is where I've always wanted to jump in with a disclaimer. But the story

49 Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance*, 45, 91-92 on “Spatiality and Creation as Hermeneutical Principles,” and Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. “Tink” Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 126-148.

50 Chief Lawrence Hart, “The Earth Is a Song Made Visible: A Cheyenne Christian Perspective,” 153-161 in Steve Heinrichs, ed. *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together* (Kitchener: Herald, 2013), 154-155, Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance*, 92.

51 See Suzanne Owen, *The Appropriation of Native American Spirituality* (Norfolk: Continuum, 2008), 11-13, 56 for a critique of Settler appropriation of Indigenous spirituality, and discussion of the universalizing history of Lakota tradition in particular. On spirituality, among many others see Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 77-78, and Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 146, 179-184.

52 Woodley (Keetoowah), “Community of Creation,” 93.

53 Donaldson is one of those Indigenous scholars who has identified particularly this passage as “unreadable for American Indians.” Laura E. Donaldson, “Theological Composting in Romans 8: An Indigenous Meditation on Paul's Rhetoric of Decay,” 142-148 in Steve Heinrichs, ed. *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together* (Kitchener: Herald, 2013), 107. Black, “Erasures and *Dysplacements*,” 191, 208-209 notes that the TRC did not “point fingers” at the biblical texts themselves even while noting the roles of the churches, and calls specifically for archival research into “the biblical presence in IRS contexts and survivor accounts.”

54 Dave Diewert, “White Christian Settlers, the Bible, and (De)Colonization,” 127-137 in Steve Heinrichs, ed. *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together* (Kitchener: Herald, 2013), 130.

55 Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 130.

56 On the long and complex relationship between Kanien'kehá:ka and the Christian Bible, see Elizabeth Elbourne, “Managing Alliance, Negotiating Christianity: Haudenosaunee Uses of Anglicanism in Northeastern North America, 1760s-1830s,” 38-60 in Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton, eds. *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 46-49.

proves the point. The default ownership of the Bible, and with it, its authorized interpretations, have so long been those of European "white" society that the Bible is seen by most, Settler and Indigenous alike, as a European set of texts.

Decolonising the texts in the public sphere, as Mitchell has challenged us to do, begins with disrupting Settler assumptions of ownership whenever and however possible. A way to begin is by disrupting the unconscious identification of biblical texts as synonymous with Settler culture. One of the ironies of biblical studies is that a scholarly discipline whose European founding principles emphasize dispassionate objectivity has historically been so bound up with the cultural contexts of its times.⁵⁷

Scholarship has tended to take opposing directions in addressing this tension. Settler scholars such as Diewert⁵⁸ and Brett,⁵⁹ and Indigenous scholars such as Archambault⁶⁰ have sought to redeem the Bible, firstly by showing the flaws and omissions in colonialist exegesis, then by highlighting biblical voices that speak for the marginalized and oppressed, especially in the prophetic tradition.⁶¹ This "anti-Empire" interpretation has been applied to New Testament texts such as the Pauline epistles by scholars such as Crossan and Borg.⁶² As in Mitchell's CSBS presidential address quoted at the outset, the aims of this hermeneutic are hortatory and reparative. *Unlike* Mitchell, this apologetic approach tends to operate according to what Boer calls a "trope of distortion" where some scholars maintain that in the hands of colonial and imperial powers the Bible—or in Crossan and Borg's case, at least parts of it—have been "misunderstood, abused, and distorted for uses that are alien to it."⁶³

Like Boer, I find common cause—but not always common exegesis—with such an approach. Choosing to focus on the Bible's more emancipatory passages, such as certain Hebrew prophets or certain countercultural roles for women and slaves, can be used as a corrective to other passages. However, as Boer notes, and Waziyatawin powerfully demonstrates, some biblical texts are

57 Two glaring examples, among many others, are the various "lives of Jesus" produced by the "search for the historical Jesus" movements, and the "Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life," a group of theologians and biblical scholars based out of the University of Jena from 1939-1945.

58 Dave Diewert, "White Christian Settlers, the Bible, and (De)Colonization."

59 Graham Paulson and Mark G Brett, "Five Smooth Stones: Reading the Bible through Aboriginal Eyes." *Colloquium* 45, 2 (2013): 199–214, Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield-Phoenix, 2008).

60 Marie-Thérèse Archambault, "Native Americans and Evangelization," 132-153 in James Treat, ed. *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 140.

61 Diewert, "White Christian Settlers," 137: "The biblical witness can be a source of encouragement and inspiration on this path of healing and liberation as we nourish our imaginations from the stream of prophetic voices passionately summoning us to justice."

62 Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

63 Roland Boer, "Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire," *Biblical Interpretation* 18, 4–5 (2010): 428-429, here 429. For an Indigenous critique of the hermeneutic used by Borg and Crossan, see Waziyatawin (Dakota), "A Serpent in the Garden: An Unholy Worldview on Sacred Land," 210-224 in Steve Heinrichs, ed. *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together* (Kitchener: Herald, 2013), 221.

irredeemably violent.⁶⁴ Biblical texts can be colonialist, misogynist, or quietist, not only in their interpretations, but from their very conception and in their pre-canonical redactions.⁶⁵ One hopes that the communities for whom the Bible is scripture will de-emphasize, ignore, re-interpret, or otherwise quarantine such violent texts. Meanwhile the task of biblical scholars and scholars of early Christianity and late Second-Temple Judaism is to identify and “call out” such texts, while, as Mitchell notes, seeking “reparative readings.”⁶⁶

Tuhiwai Smith notes that “Decolonization...does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centring our concerns and worldviews.”⁶⁷ Despite Owen’s warning that the “main question is whether or not, or how much, alternative epistemologies can be employed in an academic institution so entrenched in the European culture from which it derived,”⁶⁸ that specific work is in fact already underway. Scholars such as Donaldson,⁶⁹ Tinker,⁷⁰ Woodley (Keetoowah)⁷¹ and others are increasingly suggesting “normatively divergent,”⁷² sometimes radically new readings of the Bible from Indigenous points of view. “Up-down theologies of domination have not served the world well,” writes Tinker, proposing instead a form of “collateral-egalitarian balance and community-ist living.”⁷³ Indigenous methodologies join other contemporary challenges to hierarchical values, to pretence of objectivity, and to an attachment to an idea of static, unchanging truth:⁷⁴

Nishnaabeg Elder Jim Dumont explained the origins of the word *debwewin* to a group of students and community members at Trent University’s Annual Elders Conference in 2010. The word is normally translated as truth, and Dumont explained to us that he had difficulty breaking it down into its components, until an Elder told him to place the letter “o” in front of it. When one does that, the first component of the word is “ode” which means heart. The component “we” means the sound of. So (o)*debwewin* is “the sound of the heart;” or more specifically, in my own case, it is the sound of my heart. This means my truth will be different from someone else’s.⁷⁵

64 Waziyatawin, “A Serpent in the Garden,” 218. Waziyatawin takes special issue with two texts: Genesis 1:28 and, again, Matthew 28:19-20.

65 Boer, “Decolonizing God,” 429.

66 Mitchell, “Reading on Treaty 4 Land.” Black, “Erasures and *Dysplacements*,” 210, points out that biblical studies scholars interested in reconciliation will necessarily also concern themselves with pedagogy.

67 Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 41.

68 Owen, *The Appropriation of Native American Spirituality*, 161.

69 See Donaldson on the “contact zone”: Donaldson, “Native Women’s Double Cross,” 97.

70 George E. Tinker, “Why I Do Not Believe in a Creator,” 167-179 in Steve Heinrichs, ed. *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together* (Kitchener: Herald, 2013).

71 Woodley (Keetoowah), “Community of Creation,” 93.

72 Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance*, 88.

73 Tinker, “Why I Do Not Believe in a Creator,” 179.

74 On the virtues of an open or “unstable” text see Black, “Erasures and *Dysplacements*,” 187.

75 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2011), 59.

We who are Settler scholars must similarly work to re-read biblical texts—in our case, from outside a lens of ownership. In addition to those scholars, often also Christians, who attempt to redeem the texts through a refocussing of their interpretive centre, and those who hold that some or even most biblical texts are irredeemable, what is suggested here is another approach. This begins with “unsettling” the putative Settler ownership of the Bible, recognizing that there has almost always existed, especially in the missionary enterprise, an uncritical identity between biblical texts and colonial powers that supports their use as ideological cover for acts of violence. Seen in this light, when Settler scholars try to redeem the Bible, and when other Settler scholars reject it, both approaches still implicitly operate from the perspective of Settler claims to possession of the texts.

An Aware-Settler perspective works in several complementary ways. Firstly, the shock of realizing—or more commonly, being *forced* to realize—our Settler status and its allied hermeneutics of possession, can momentarily alienate those of us who are Settlers from scriptural texts that may once have seemed exclusively, or primarily “ours.” Breaking assumptions of ownership and suspending the usual habits of interpretation that go with it shows those of us who are Settlers that the familiarity we believe we have with, for example, the stories of Genesis,⁷⁶ or with Paul’s letters,⁷⁷ are yet again expressions of the false claims of possession typical of colonialism.

It is a change of focus from normative texts to an examination of normative *readings* that is important. Here Aware-Settler hermeneutics joins with Indigenous theorists (and in turn, with gendered,⁷⁸ Marxist,⁷⁹ Queer,⁸⁰ and other scholars of the Bible) in demonstrating the ways that certain hermeneutics hide a complicity born of the blindness to perspective typical of those whose relative position is already privileged (or perhaps, as Schüssler Fiorenza recently pointed out, those whose work is already “co-opted” by neoliberal globalization.)⁸¹ Paulette Regan reminds us that: “Claiming ignorance is a colonial strategy....Reconciliation conceptualized as an intercultural encounter involves creating a space for critical dialogue.”⁸² When those of us who are Settler-descended biblical scholars take seriously our heritage and identity as Settlers, that realization can change our re-

76 Woodley (Keetoowah), “Community of Creation,” 97–100.

77 The “Paul within Judaism” approach, also sometimes known as the “radical new perspective” has been particularly focussed on seeing Paul within his own context. Although this is not its aim, such an approach requires a similar “dispossession” hermeneutic from Anglo-European and other minority world scholars. See among others, Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven, Yale University Publishing, 2017).

78 Anna Marie Smith, “Subjectivity and Subjectivation,” 956, in M. E. Hawkesworth and Lisa Jane Disch, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 956.

79 Neil Elliott, “Diagnosing an Allergic Reaction: The Avoidance of Marx in Pauline Scholarship,” *Bible and Critical Theory* 8, 2 (2012): 3–15.

80 Ken Stone, “Homosexuality and the Bible or Queer Reading? A Response to Martti Nissinen,” *Theology & Sexuality* 14 (March 2001): 107–18, here especially 113–114.

81 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Feminist Remappings in Times of Neoliberalism,” 170–184 in Yvonne Sherwood, ed. *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 172.

82 Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 41.

search in ways positive both for us and for the community of scholarship, particularly in the Lands in which we live.

Punt notes: “Interpreters as well as listeners and readers of the interpretation are both connected to and constitutive of their social locations.”⁸³ By listening to how others encounter and engage with the texts, we learn from questions and observations we had not thought even to ask. Whether in feminist/gender analyses,⁸⁴ or other decolonising readings, a benefit to the entire interpretive community has arisen from giving space to many different non-privileged readings.⁸⁵

Landedness, Relationality, Spirituality, and Community Good

In its questioning of hidden, assumed, and privileged interpretive perspectives and narratives, and its attention to the power dynamics of interpretation, the Aware-Settler “take” on texts is similar to other decolonising readings. Likewise, the notion that scholarship must be directed toward bringing about justice or some benefit to the community is not new; whether explicit or more often implicit, the goal of pointing out hidden power relations in texts and their interpretation is to unmask them in the interests of greater justice.

What distinguishes the Aware-Settler approach are precisely those elements from what Donaldson calls “the contact zone,”⁸⁶ in which it engages with, and learns from, Indigenous methodologies. Of course, Indigenous methodologies are not themselves unitary. Hermeneutical lenses including Creation,⁸⁷ Narrative/Story,⁸⁸ Ceremony,⁸⁹ and others are variously identified as important by Indigenous scholars. An attention to narrative/story in biblical texts recognizes not only that theology is expressed in narrative, but also that most scriptures were born from story-based cultures, and the narratives of scripture—eventually crystallized into text—were first crafted and re-crafted to ensure their memorability.⁹⁰

83 Jeremy Punt, “A Cultural Turn in New Testament Studies?” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 72, 4, (2016): e1-17, here e2.

84 See for example, Schüssler Fiorenza, “Feminist Remappings,” 172.

85 Sara Parks, “‘The Brooten Phenomenon’: Moving Women from the Margins in Second-Temple and New Testament Scholarship,” *The Bible & Critical Theory* 15, 1 (2019): 46-64, here 60.

86 Donaldson, *Native Women’s Double Cross*, 100–101.

87 Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance*, 91.

88 Donaldson, *Native Women’s Double Cross*, 103. For the importance of sacred narratives in nêhiyawak (Cree and Michif) culture, see: Tasha Beeds, “Rethinking Edward Ahenakew’s Intellectual Legacy: Expressions of nêhiyawî-mâmitonêyihcikan (Cree Consciousness or Thinking),” 119–141, in Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton, eds. *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 136.

89 Timothy Pearson, “Reading Rituals: Performance and Religious Encounter in Early Colonial Northeastern North America,” 21-37 in Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton, eds. *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 21, 33.

90 Arthur J. Dewey, “The Locus for Death: Social Memory and the Passion Narratives,” 119-128 in Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, eds. *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 121–122.

Here I will focus on four aspects of reading that many Indigenous scholars highlight in particular: Landedness,⁹¹ relationality,⁹² spirituality,⁹³ and community good.

"In Indigenous contexts," writes Absolon, "location does matter. People want to know who you are, what you are doing and why."⁹⁴ Tuhiwai Smith underlines the same point: "We know what we know from where we stand."⁹⁵ The interpreter is, without apology, bound to a certain locale and community, which influence their readings. Of necessity this tends to preclude normative, "universal" readings of biblical texts which ignore specific Land, a factor that Indigenous researchers rightly point out is omitted primarily by those who benefit from not mentioning it.⁹⁶

There will be as many decolonising methodologies as there are locales and contexts. Decolonising may be the underlying approach, but the specific reading will always arise from a community and a territory, and ideally serve that community and Land.⁹⁷ Indigenous methodologies go beyond most decolonising approaches by being quite specific in inviting scholars to ask the existential question of what good—or ill—our work may be bringing both to Creation and to our communities (recognizing, as Woodley Keetoowah reminds us, that that community of relations encompasses creation).⁹⁸

Rather than defining biblical exegesis as an interrogation of the text, or perhaps *multiple* ways of interrogating the text, scholars such as Donaldson give examples of exegesis as a relational enterprise,⁹⁹ something more like a conversation. Instead of the text being an inert object, a set of words that requires prying open, the texts are living traditions, narratives constantly contextualizing themselves in specific places—and specific relations. Here again Settler biblical scholars must take note, starting (as Black has done)¹⁰⁰ by attending to the Land on which they live and work.

From its origins in the Enlightenment and because of its hard-fought independence from ecclesial authority, the discipline of biblical studies fashioned itself after the sciences early on, proposing and then testing propositions and proceeding from a Cartesian doubt of everything to supposedly limited but demonstrable truths. Such an approach, never fully successful, ironically has made

91 Absolon, *Kaandossiwin*, 71.

92 Tinker, "Why I Do Not Believe in a Creator," 176-179.

93 Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance*, 109.

94 Absolon, *Kaandossiwin*, 71.

95 Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 7.

96 Taiaiake Alfred, *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

97 Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. "Tink" Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 128-129.

98 Woodley (Keetoowah), "Community of Creation," 93, and Daniel R. Wildcat, "Just Creation: Enhancing Life in a World of Relatives," 295-309 in Steve Heinrichs, ed. *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together* (Kitchener: Herald, 2013), 297.

99 Donaldson, *Native Women's Double Cross*, 107.

100 Black, "Reading the Bible in 'Our Home and Native Land.'"

biblical studies antithetical to epistemologies rooted in specific Land and relation,¹⁰¹ and especially hesitant around precisely the kinds of spiritual assertions made by the texts it studies. Kovach calls this “Western science’s uneasy relationship with the metaphysical.”¹⁰²

At the same time, we are each imbedded in different contexts, living in different Lands, and according to Indigenous scholarship all these relational aspects of spirituality inevitably affect our interactions with scriptural texts.¹⁰³ The texts have spiritual aims and effects; we are all spiritual beings, whether academics or general readers, agnostic, atheist, or committed to a particular tradition.

This is perhaps where Indigenous methodologies differ most from Western decolonising scholarship or qualitative methodologies. Tuhiwai Smith states: “The values, attitudes, concepts, and language embedded in beliefs about spirituality represent, in many cases, the clearest contrast and mark of difference between indigenous peoples and the West.”¹⁰⁴ Most Indigenous methodologies situate themselves within a worldview that assumes that humanity is spiritual and lives within a spiritual world, a point of view from which, for their own reasons, many European-background postcolonial theorists recoil. Kathleen Minogizhigokwe Absolon notes: “Spirituality is inherent in Indigenous epistemology, which sees everything in relation to Creation.”¹⁰⁵ While Absolon is speaking as, and for, Indigenous scholars, and not to create “pathways to sacred knowledges”¹⁰⁶ for non-Indigenous communities, Settler researchers who dismiss *a priori* any discussion of the spiritual aspects of life are automatically dismissing what Indigenous researchers are saying we need to look to first.

This spirituality, however, is not usually “Christian” in the historic, Euro-centric understandings of that term. Nor is it ethereal and divorced from the other elements of Indigenous identity with which it is usually mentioned: Ceremony, Land,¹⁰⁷ story, dreams,¹⁰⁸ and community good. Tinker discusses “the personhood of all things in creation,” and, as an example of this interrelationship, the prayers which typically precede a hunt, as well as the offerings of tobacco or corn which often follow the animal’s death.¹⁰⁹ My own experience in walking long-distance journeys with Michif and Cree walkers is that spirituality, whether in smudging,¹¹⁰ prayers, or tobacco offerings, was embod-

101 Nadeau, “Decolonizing Religious Encounter?” 178.

102 Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 68.

103 Kidwell, Noley, and Tinker, *Native American Theology*, 72.

104 Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 78

105 Absolon, *Kaandossiwin*, 61.

106 Absolon, *Kaandossiwin*, 48.

107 See, for instance, Donaldson’s critique of N.T. Wright on Paul and “decay” in Donaldson, “Theological Composting,” 146.

108 Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 93. Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 180-182, discusses the role of dream life in Indigenous spiritualities in the context of the Nêhiyâw concept of *miskâsowin*, “going to the centre of yourself.” While the Bible contains numerous examples of dreams treated by its characters as divine revelation, Settler biblical scholars, working on the level of text or “verifiable” history would usually bracket such accounts.

109 Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance*, 109.

110 Although much more can be said about it, smudging is an Indigenous Ceremony involving the sharing of, by

ied through Protocols linking Ceremony and Land, and was expressive during our walks of relationality with the Land.¹¹¹

Given that the Bible is a set of religious texts, it is ironic that perhaps the attention paid to spirituality by Indigenous scholars, and the interpretive place encouraged for it, will have the most to teach Settler biblical scholars. Settler biblical studies has been, almost by definition, a metaphysical-free enterprise abhorrent of theological agendas: it will be interesting to see how Settler biblical scholars learn from this aspect in the "contact zone." We Settler scholars must re-examine our own spiritual resources without, on the one hand, reverting to our own colonizing notions of universal spiritual truths allied to (our) cultures,¹¹² or, on the other, (as historically happened among Canadian Treaty commissioners) participating in Indigenous protocols without understanding or respecting their spiritual, relational, and political import.¹¹³

Here, a hermeneutic that brings in spirituality worked out in relationality (rather than backed by the historic European notion of authority, whether bishop, guild, or creed) is helpful. To begin with, Aware-Settler hermeneutics that open themselves to spirituality will do so because of the good it may bring back to the community, and the chance it offers to better understand Indigenous knowledges, giving space to them and learning from them, in Kovach's words, in "respect and reciprocity."¹¹⁴ The twin emphases on relationality and the community good act, in this way, as a guide to Aware-Settler attempts to engage in a non-destructive way with the spirituality in the texts and in ourselves.

It may seem a small thing, but is not, that Indigenous methodologies (and spiritualities) are often also characterised by a sense of humour in interpretation and a keen eye to the humour already in texts that is often lacking in the Western academy—especially sometimes, it seems, in biblical studies.¹¹⁵ Marie-Thérèse Archambault notes that the Heyoka "clown figure" is sacred in Lakota culture.¹¹⁶ Raymond Aldred, director of Indigenous Studies at the Vancouver School of Theology, told me how Nêhiyâw Christians have always understood Jesus' statement "The Kingdom of God has come near

covering oneself over with, the smoke that wafts from the burning of sweetgrass or of sage.

111 In 2015, 2017, and 2018 I walked long-distance traditional trails across the Prairies in mixed Settler-Indigenous groups as a way of marking these trails, emphasizing Indigenous presence, remembering history, and advocating for public access. Matthew R. Anderson, "Pilgrimage and Challenging a Canadian Foundational Myth," 148-164 in Ian S. McIntosh, E Moore Quinn, Vivian Keely, eds. *Pilgrimage in Practice: Narration, Reclamation, and Healing* (Wallingford, UK: CABI Press, 2018).

112 This would extend to insistence by Settler, whether Christian, or scholar, or both, on canonical notions of scripture, and to those readings that insist that the Bible must be correct, and that abuses justified by it were due only to incorrect interpretations.

113 For a first-person Indigenous appraisal of the Ceremonies preceding Treaty Six negotiations with Canadian officials see Peter Erasmus, *Buffalo Days and Nights* (Calgary: Fifth House, 1999), 240. That Canadian negotiators did not understand or respect Protocols during Treaty-making, and therefore interpreted the results falsely, is the argument put forward by Sheldon Krakowski in *No Surrender: The Land Remains Indigenous* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2019).

114 Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 178.

115 On the figure of the "Trickster" see Kidwell, Noley, and Tinker, *Native American Theology*, 113-125.

116 Archambault, "Native Americans and Evangelization," 143.

to you,” as a word-play: Jesus is speaking of himself as the Kingdom, standing right beside them. Like any good story-teller, they imagine him looking at his audience as he says this, to see if they get it.¹¹⁷

An Aware-Settler biblical studies methodology sees its lack of ownership of the text and assumes instead a conflicted identification with it. It seeks to practice a necessarily deconstructed, disrupted, and disjunctive reading similar to those proposed by scholars such as Stone and others in terms of normative sexuality.¹¹⁸ From Indigenous methodologies it tries to learn more about relationality,¹¹⁹ Landedness, and especially spirituality (with its humour) as hermeneutical lenses through which to understand a conversation with a text. In common with Indigenous hermeneutics, but for its own reasons of repentance (and responsible relationality,) “Aware-Settler” readings reject simple critique¹²⁰ and seek “dialogue between critical and common concerns,”¹²¹ looking for what good might be brought back to local communities as a result of research.

A Test-Case: Matthew 28:16–20

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him [Jesus], they worshipped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’
(NRSV)

Matthew 28:16–20 is a particularly important text for an Aware-Settler hermeneutic. Known by Christians as “The Great Commission,” this passage undergirds the missionary enterprise as it variously encountered Indigenous peoples and cultures. Waziyatawin writes, “The only Christian teaching that rivals the destructiveness of the ‘dominion mandate’ is the great commission, rooted in the particularity of Christ’s exclusive saving power.”¹²²

In the Canadian context, and especially in church-run Residential Schools, it is not unreasonable to propose that some understanding of this passage likely existed behind most church efforts to “Christianize” Indigenous children by isolating them from their parents and communities and de-

117 For another example of Settlers not “getting” the humour, see Carmen Landsdowne, “Autoethnography That Breaks Your Heart: Or What Does an Interdisciplinary Do when What She Was Hoping for Simply Isn’t There?” 183-204 in Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton, eds. *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 197.

118 Stone, “Queer Reading?” 112.

119 Archambault, “Native Americans and Evangelization,” 143, on “all my relatives.”

120 Ashley Barnwell, “Entanglements of Evidence in the Turn Against Critique,” *Cultural Studies* 30, 6 (November 2016): 906–25, here 907.

121 Barnwell, “Turn Against Critique,” 914.

122 Waziyatawin, “A Serpent in the Garden,” 219.

nying them traditional spiritual formation.¹²³ Questioning this passage in particular, with its seeming command to evangelize, is a way of understanding not only the destructive history of colonialism, but also hermeneutical ways forward.¹²⁴ As Black states, "Often, in order to overturn traditional and oppressive interpretive framings, one might invite certain types of dissent—or rupture—into the interpretive conversation."¹²⁵

A complete Aware-Settler exegesis of the text is beyond the scope of this introductory article. Consistent with the methodology sketched out above, the results of any such study would vary greatly depending on the interrogator (one might say the "relation") as well as the location. However, even a brief example shows something of what such a methodology might yield.

I am a Settler-scholar. Although in recent years I have worked with and learned from the Kanien'kehá:ka of Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory, the Land I most identify with is the northern Great Plains of North America, Treaty 4 territory shared by Nêhiyáw, Assiniboine, Lakota, and Blackfoot groups, among others. When I close my eyes and think "Land," and, importantly, "home," I see rolling plains and treed ravines.¹²⁶

Land is a hidden-default aspect of this text not normally noted by Settler scholarship. As the disciples travel toward the mountain in Galilee in verse 16, we note both the journey theme and that the text carefully places the disciples' encounter with the risen Christ on specific Land. The Galilee was an area dominated by the capital at Jerusalem economically, culturally, and politically.¹²⁷ The area was at the same time colonized and indirectly governed and policed militarily by Rome. It was a region where Jewish villages existed alongside Greek cities, a liminal space cultically (as shown in the Gadarene story borrowed from Mark, at Matt 8:28–9:1) despite the ubiquity and universality of Hellenic culture throughout the entire Mediterranean.

Christ's commissioning moment takes place in occupied territory. The text represents here, as elsewhere in the gospels and the New Testament, a privileging of the margins rather than the centres of political or economic power. The disciples do not own this Land; they move through it, and yet it is home. Overall, the concern of Matthew's text is political by means of eschatology and relationship: the disciples' relationship with Jesus (and through him, the god of Israel) completely redefines their

123 "A Knock on the Door: The Essential History of Residential Schools from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Edited and Abridged," *Perceptions on Truth and Reconciliation* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 7. See also Black, "Erasures and *Dysplacements*," 208-209.

124 Indigenous Christians have long identified "mission" as a particular sticking point for moving forward in an Indigenous hermeneutic of the Bible, and as a result mission's inevitable cultural positioning. This article learns from that lead in examining Aware-Settler approaches. See James L. West, "Indian Spirituality: Another Vision," 29-37 in James Treat, ed. *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 35-36.

125 Black, "Erasures and *Dysplacements*," 189.

126 Similar to the experience of Edugyan, *Dreaming of Elsewhere*, 31.

127 The Gospel of Matthew's particular antipathy to the leadership of Jerusalem has been pointed out by scholarship. See Warren Carter, "Matthew," 127-172 in Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and David A. Sánchez, eds. *The New Testament Fortress Commentary on the Bible*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 129, 170, and Anthony J. Saldarini, "Boundaries and Polemics in the Gospel of Matthew," *Biblical Interpretation* 3, 3 (1995): 239-265, here 245.

relationship with Rome, placing it on a pressing eschatological timeline.¹²⁸ According to Matthew, before he can commission them, the risen Christ makes the disciples journey across this Territory from which most of them come; it is as if they must know where they are from before they can go anywhere else.

Without exploring it fully at this point, I want to flag that Matthew's story takes place between the *risen* Jesus and the disciples. Matthew's gospel is a generation later than Paul, who already struggled to describe the nature of his experiences of Christ and of the "resurrection body" (see 1 Cor 15). The resurrected Jesus is like those colonized who "insist on presence where they have been absent-ed, where ghosts of the dead or the assimilated remain to challenge the story that dominates."¹²⁹

"The eleven disciples went to Galilee." Similar to other decolonising approaches, the dispossession from the text indicative of an Aware-Settler methodology breaks the link that it is tempting to make here between the interpreter and the disciples: it is not we who travel to Galilee, it is the group of those Jewish followers of Jesus, the eleven, who represent the eschatological new Israel. As Mitchell noted in her address, we Settler scholars must "contextualize the plain readings."¹³⁰ One way of doing this is taking ourselves, as Settlers, out of the text to see what it then says to us. This is not yet our story; our interpretive place in the text comes later.

Verse 17 notes that some worshipped Jesus, while others doubted.¹³¹ Whatever Matthew's authorial aims, in the reception of the text amidst "all our relations" there is a place for those who believe and those who doubt. The question of authority in verse 18 is read, in Aware-Settler hermeneutics, not as an absolute authority but for the link to the resurrection that the author of the gospel, like all early Jesus-followers, would have assumed. It was because the god of Israel raised Jesus from the dead that he is said to have "all authority." It is thus a relational authority, gained and maintained in relationship with God and exercised in ongoing relationship with the disciples (20b).¹³²

Verse 19 is the crux of the passage, at least in terms of decolonising and Aware-Settler hermeneutics: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." It was because of an over-identification with the first disciples (if not with Jesus himself) that European, Canadian, American, and Australian missionaries in concert with colonial authorities made it their work to "Christianize" those whom they deemed "savages." An Aware-Settler hermeneutic immediately flags at least two things: the movement of Jesus' first disciples at the time of the writing of this text was not yet Christianity, and the

128 This is also Paul's way of viewing the relationship with Roman Imperial power, decades earlier than the writing of Matthew. As important as the Empire may have been to daily life, it was peripheral to the god of Israel's plan for the redemption of the cosmos. See David G. Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul*. (3rd Edition; London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 172.

129 Black, "Erasures and *Dysplacements*," 206.

130 Mitchell, "Reading Biblical Conquest Stories on Treaty 4 Land."

131 Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew," 677-695 in Newsom, Carol A., Ringe, Sharon H., and Lapsley, Jacqueline E., eds. *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Revised and Expanded Edition; London: SPCK, 2014), 695, notes that it was among the "11 (men)" that Matthew reports doubts, while he reports the women as faithful witness of the resurrection.

132 Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagan's Apostle*, 145.

nations were not Others. They were *us*. Here is the hinge on which the European missionary enterprise has turned. It is based on a failure to note that the term "nations" in Matthew is also the term for "gentiles."¹³³ Christians *are* the nations.¹³⁴ European Christians, together with all other non-Jews before and since, are the *recipients* of the action envisioned in this text, not its instigators.

Because this passage is found in Matthew, with its very Jewish Jesus upholding the Torah (Matt 5.17-20), the words in verse 19 about baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (unique in the New Testament) must be kept in relationship with those immediately following: "and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded..." There is nothing Euro-Christian about this part of the text. Part of its foreignness to the present-day movement is that it presumes that Jesus' followers will observe Torah.¹³⁵ Once that is understood, the historically-assumed superiority of European Christianity is revealed for the self-deceit that it has always been, and its arrogance toward (other) Indigenous forms of spirituality is shown as unsupported and unsupportable in the text.¹³⁶ Matthew's text underlines what historians of early Christianities have demonstrated with their constructions of present-day Christianity's progenitors: Indigenous acculturations of Christianity are not the exception, but the rule.

That there is an ongoing spiritual and relational aspect to the text can be read into the last half of verse 20: "I myself will be with you until the end of this present age." From the beginning, the presence of Christ in spirit was one of the hallmarks of the movement, paired with an eschatological urgency (until the *approaching* end of the age)¹³⁷ and an apocalyptic hope that are quite foreign to the mindset of any power seeking to establish its permanence through domination of others.¹³⁸ Colonialist aspirations to permanence are similarly antithetical to the cycles of destruction and renewal that Kidwell, Noley, and Tinker identify as common to many Indigenous forms of eschatological thinking.¹³⁹

133 Against David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 171.

134 I am speaking here of Christianity as it eventually developed into an almost entirely gentile religion, not of Jesus' first followers nor the early centuries. For more on this see the extensive "parting of the ways" literature, for instance: Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

135 Lamar Cope noted the Torah emphasis in the Great Commission already in 1989: O. Lamar Cope, "'To the Close of the Age': The Role of Apocalyptic Thought in the Gospel of Matthew," 113-124 in Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards, eds. *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 120-121.

136 For a postcolonial reading from a Korean viewpoint, especially interesting for its enculturating methodology and its critique of how Koreans are in turn "missionizing" others, see Yonghan Chung, "A Postcolonial Reading of the Great Commission (Matt 28:16-20) with a Korean Myth," *Theology Today* 72, 3 (October 2015): 276-88.

137 Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 150, and 170-172, points out that the "Commission" does not speak against an "imminent end expectation."

138 Matthew's apocalyptic eschatology has been widely noted. Cope, "'To the Close of the Age'", Kristian Ben-doraitis, "Apocalypticism, Angels and Matthew," 31-51 in Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, eds. *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017), and Nicholas G. Piotrowski "'After the Deportation': Observations in Matthew's Apocalyptic Genealogy," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 25, 2 (2015): 189-203, here 202.

139 Kidwell, Noley, and Tinker, *Native American Theology*, 153.

There is simply no linkage in this passage between “saved” and “civilized,” where the latter meant “European-ized.”¹⁴⁰ Rather Matthew portrays the crucified and resurrected Messiah returning to judge all temporal powers on the basis of a paramount Indigenous principle: relationality. Those who are welcomed into paradise are affirmed, not for any affirmations of belief, but for their respect of the community of relations, specifically, how they have treated “the least” (Matt 25:31–46). Although the text shows signs of a community grappling with the delay of this expected return, ethical imperatives were not abrogated by the tardiness of the expected judgement. Rather, if anything, the requirements to live justly within community are increased.¹⁴¹ Matthew’s original audience were not the imperially powerful of their day, but a beleaguered and frightened minority.¹⁴² Their consolation, presented in this text, is that Christ is present to the disciples (“I am with you always”), and to the nations that in all their variety will come to be included among them.

Here, Tinker’s use of the eschatological concept of the *basileia* not—or not only—in a temporal sense, but in its sense as spatiality, is helpful.¹⁴³ In both the connection of the Jesus-message to Land and its spatially-open nature as pointed out by Tinker, it is worth noting, alongside the gospel accounts of resurrection appearances, that Matthew’s gospel in and of itself does not prescribe a canonical time limit to such appearances. Aware-Settler exegesis understands not only the foreignness of the texts but also their openness¹⁴⁴ and inherent mutability.¹⁴⁵

Conclusion

Read through an Aware-Settler hermeneutic, the once-familiar “Great Commission” text from Matthew is revealed as alien in many ways not only to those of us who are Settler scholars, but to forms of the European Christianity that used and continue to use it as an ideological cover for cultural and economic assimilation.¹⁴⁶ Simply put, as a Settler I must realize that this is not a text I own. Our claims to own it—whether religiously, in churches, or academically, through assumptions of cultural appropriation—have been a form of idolatry. As Paulette Regan notes in a different context, this is “a truth telling in which we confront our own history and identity and make visible how these colonial

140 Carter, “Matthew,” 171.

141 John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 268.

142 Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 224.

143 Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance*, 83-89.

144 Black, “Erasures and *Dysplacements*,” 187 and 197, proposes an “unstable” text.

145 As an example see Amanda Fehr, “A Subversive Sincerity: The Iyem Memorial, Catholicism, and Political Opportunity in S’olh Téméxw,” 61-79 in Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton, eds. *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 61, 74-75, where ongoing appearances of Jesus were memorialized by the Stó:lō in the Fraser Valley.

146 For a Ghanaian and visual use of the “Great Commission” in art, see: G. Ossom-Batsa and F. Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship,” *International Review of Mission* 107 (2018): 261-278.

practices continue today."¹⁴⁷ Matthew 28.16–20's inherent Jewish character—after all, the initial confession is that it is the god of *Israel* who raised Jesus, and who will bring about the end of the present age—shows just how Jewish are the foundational documents of the New Testament. This puts European Christianity, and the secular forms of biblical studies which descended from it, into their proper place. Whatever sharing of gifts might take place between Settlers and Indigenous peoples should be seen as just that: a sharing between equals, branches grafted onto the tree together. This is quite different from the destructive and dishonest missionary "burden" that historically stood aloof from Indigenous Ceremony,¹⁴⁸ its supposed concern for others barely masking an imperial ideology unjustified by this text.

In one sense—and recognizing that such a term requires its own unpacking—I am proposing that the texts of the Bible may be understood as "Treaty Lands." The benefits of such a hermeneutic would include that it recognizes, firstly, the impropriety of Settler academics' and Settler religious institutions' claims to ownership of these texts, and secondly, the sovereignty of the different groups that "live" on the Land of the texts. However, as most biblical scholars instinctively recognize, where a Treaty Land understanding of biblical texts would fail is in any conceptualization that the texts were ever *Terra Nullius*; that is, that they were ever free from claims of ownership and from ideological, often violent, use.¹⁴⁹ Scriptures were often written precisely to support or contest political and identity claims, or to move communities toward or away from social ideals that excluded groups.¹⁵⁰ The very notion of canon arises from claims of ownership and their concomitant exclusions.

Very near where I was born, in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, on Treaty Four Land, there is a rare spot on the edge of a valley where the prairie grasses have not been touched by cultivation. The camping stones from an Assiniboine, or perhaps Nêhiyáw, tent-ring in the 1800s lie in the grass. They sit, mostly undisturbed, in the same circle left a century and a half ago by the people most of whose descendants make their contemporary homes north and east of there. Growing up I would perch myself on the edge of that coulee (the *Michif*, or Métis name for such a valley) and look back at the falling-down buildings constructed by my own ancestors on that same Land. I could feel then—and still feel now—the peculiar identity of a partially-aware Settler. This was my home, but at the same time it wasn't. I was a child of that earth and no other. But the grasses and the wind spoke to me also of my foreignness and my people's recent arrival, evidenced by the mute physical facts of the camping stones in the circle to one side and the abandoned and decomposing Settler buildings to the other. "All our stories are about home," writes novelist Esi Edugyan. "It is our privilege as

147 Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 235.

148 Pearson, "Reading Rituals," 32.

149 Agreeing with Boer's critique of reading the Bible as anti-imperial, in Roland Boer, "Imperial Fetish: On Anti-Imperial Readings of the Bible," 45-63 in Tat-Siong Liew, and Erin Runions, eds. *Psychoanalytic Mediations between Marxist and Postcolonial Readings of the Bible* (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 46-47.

150 For instance, scholars who view the Pastoral letters as non-Pauline recognize in them a move away from the limited egalitarianism of Paul's early assemblies and toward familial ideals espoused by the early Roman Empire, especially in their exclusion of women.

creatures of language who exist within a narrative space, that is, who are trapped inside time. And it is our responsibility as well. We owe it to each other to struggle.”¹⁵¹

A reading of Matthew 28.16–20 such as that given above may seem to question more about the text than it asserts. Perhaps this is the gift that is brought back by Aware-Settler exegesis to the Settler-Indigenous Treaty relationship. Our “strangeness” is revealed to be true not only of the place we who are Settler biblical scholars have on the Land, but also of our place in the pages of scripture.¹⁵² We are in a relationship with those texts, but we do not “own” them, either. A responsible relationship recognizes their strangeness and keeps those of us who are Settler scholars on the path of seeking knowledges from the texts that will bring health and wholeness to all our relations. Reconciliation is still far off. But Settlers only begin to be good Treaty partners when we are ready to question foundations and understand that the texts speak with voices other than our own.

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¹⁵¹ Edugyan, *Dreaming of Elsewhere*, 31,32.

¹⁵² Black, “Erasures and *Dysplacements*,” 185, defines the term *dysplacement* as “the state of being present, but at ill ease, in the land.” Because the term was first developed in part to describe a First Nations experience, I am avoiding it in speaking of my Settler experience, in favour of “strangeness,” in the sense of “uncanny” un-homeness. On “*dysplacement*” see further Deborah Davis Jackson, “Scents of Place: The *Dysplacement* of a First Nations Community in Canada,” *American Anthropologist* 113,4 (2011): 606-618, here 614-615.

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